

**POLICY PAPER**

**THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CONFLICT  
PREVENTION:  
MORE SPECIFIC COMMITMENTS NEEDED**

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November 2004

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Tento autorský text neprošel ediční úpravou.

## **The European Union and conflict prevention: More specific commitments needed**

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June 2004

### **The existing situation and the main problems**

Conflict prevention as an explicit and more substantially conceptualised concern of international cooperation and of international organisations emerged in the 1990s. Even though there is no prevalent and consensual definition of conflict prevention, there is the general understanding of it as attempts to solve conflicts before they grow into violent confrontation. The concept of the prevention of conflicts as such at the level of international organisations was first elaborated in a more specific way by the United Nations (UN), namely in the 1992 UN Secretary-General report Agenda for Peace. In the late 1990s, conflict prevention was underscored as an objective by other global organisations such as the G7, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and World Bank. It is also a subject of the activities of regional organisations, particularly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

In spite of the fact that the European Union (EU) has also sought to develop its conflict prevention policy in recent years, the current institutional set-up of the policy is marked by a number of shortcomings or problems that may well hamper the efficiency of the policy's practice. This paper identifies the main problems in the policy's set-up and presents recommendations on how to solve them. The paper does not address the question of whether conflict prevention is or is not a suitable option for the EU's external policy. Instead, it takes as given that the EU seeks to develop a conflict prevention policy and explores what is currently impeding its efficiency. It should also be noted that the paper concentrates on the internal institutional development and its deficiencies and not on the practice of the policy. The basic method is to look at how the policy is set up and to assess this in terms of efficiency.

### **1. The lack of a clear role**



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At the beginning of this decade, the EU's conflict prevention policy underwent a considerable development, which stands out particularly when compared to the institutionalisation of the policy in the previous periods. With regard to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as one part of the external relations of the EU, conflict prevention was already defined as a policy objective in the early 1990s, but was not elaborated on in a substantial way. A more intensive emphasis on conflict prevention within the CFSP emerged in the mid-1990s, but was limited to Africa. As far as the European Community (EC), as another pillar of the EU's external relations is concerned, its conflict prevention efforts were also limited since they were carried out primarily within development policy and, again, in the context of Africa. By contrast, **at the beginning of this decade the EU's conflict prevention policy reached the level of a self-existing policy field with a comprehensive focus.** In the course of the building of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) EU institutions adopted several important documents on the subject. Above all, it is the EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts adopted by the European Council in June 2001 that can be considered as the basis of the establishment of the policy as a self-existing area.

Nevertheless, despite this increase in the policy's institutionalisation, the shape in which the policy is currently defined may lead to considerable uncertainty among EU actors about conflict prevention as a reliable and viable security tool. Above all, it is not clear what the position of the policy on the hierarchy of the EU's instruments is. More explicitly, it is necessary to point out that EU has been concentrated in recent years primarily on the development of military based instruments. Thus, it appears that the EU prefers to build its security strategy primarily on the management of crises and not on their prevention. In any case, **it is not clear whether the conflict prevention policy should function as an essential or additional, and indeed self-existing or supplementary, option.** In consequence, the unclear status of the policy is likely to impede the perception of it as a credible means by EU actors.

**2. The lack of a precise strategy**

The existing documents of the EU's conflict prevention policy suggest that **the EU intends to rely both on the structural and operational prevention of conflicts** (in EU parlance the long-term and short-term prevention). The distinction between these two types of conflict prevention represents one of the existing classifications of conflict prevention

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strategies. While structural prevention of conflicts concentrates on structural conditions or the roots underlying conflicts, operational prevention focuses on immediate incentives. As EU documents reveal, both structural and operational prevention belong to the EU's aims.

However, **although the EU claims to employ both conflict prevention strategies, it does not specify whether it treats both options as equally important or puts more emphasis on one of them.** Again, a more specific strategy would yield an increase in the EU's credibility in this particular area.

**3. The multiplicity of institutions**

As already mentioned, the EU's conflict prevention policy is based on both the CFSP and the EC, and their institutions. In general, **by drawing on both the CFSP and EC, the Union maximises its conflict prevention potential.** Consequently, it is both the Council of the EU and the Commission that represent the important decision-making institutions for the policy. The building of the ESDP led to the origin of several institutions operating within the Council and related in one way or another to conflict prevention. In this respect, the main policy making body is, except for the Council as such, the Political and Security Committee (PSC). Within the Commission, the main institution devoted to conflict prevention is the Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management Unit (CPCMU), existing since 2000 in DG External Relations (DG RELEX).

**In spite of the great potential stemming from the use of both CFSP and EC resources, this also has the negative consequence of a rather complicated decision-making process.** More specifically, this state of affairs in which neither the Council or one of its bodies nor the Commission is vested with a coordinating role in conflict prevention can decrease the policy's efficiency. Nevertheless, the low coordination of the EU's conflict prevention decision making is just a manifestation of the often lamented incoherence of the institutional system of the EU's external relations in general.

**4. Uncoordinated and underdeveloped capacities**

Apparently, **the EU has a great deal of capacity for conflict prevention** at its disposal. Operational prevention depends in the EU case largely on the general development of the CFSP. As CFSP institutions as well as instruments have been considerably developed in the recent past, it is possible to believe that the EU has enough tools for the operational prevention of conflicts. The EU is also a particularly powerful actor in terms of structural

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prevention. The source of EU ability in this field is its economic power, which can be used both as a carrot and stick for the compliance of other actors. More specifically, the EU has employed conditionality in its relations with both the post-communist states (European Agreements) and Africa (the Cotonou Agreement).

**The recent development of the EU's conflict prevention policy also resulted in the emergence of proper conflict prevention tools such as analysis and assessment instruments.** Regarding operational prevention, a few institutions were developed within the Council's structure with a focus on early warning, analysis, and planning. The most important of them is probably the Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit (PPEWU), which has already been functioning since 1999. The PPEWU is to work closely with the Joint Situation Centre (SITCEN), which is a common institution of the PPEWU and the Military Staff as another Council institution. The Commission is also engaged in monitoring and planning in terms of operational prevention, but it is primarily the main institution dealing with analysis and assessment related to structural prevention efforts. Since the late 1990s, the Commission has developed the so-called Country/Regional Strategy Papers and also a Check-List including necessary evaluative indicators.

**In spite of the fact that the EU maintains proper conflict prevention instruments, the situation is far from being optimal** in this area. The fact that there is a number of institutions (PPEWU, SITCEN, EUMS, Commission) dealing with analysis and assessment seems to be a problem rather than an advantage. As a consequence, this is likely to have a negative impact on the overall efficiency of the policy since there is no institution that could coordinate conflict prevention activities. At the same time, another problem is that the above-mentioned institutions are marked by quite low numbers of staff and a wide range of tasks, most of which actually fall into the management of crises category, rather than focusing on their prevention.

**THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CONFLICT PREVENTION:  
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Since the EU should adopt certain collective decisions with regard to its conflict prevention policy, the recommendations below are addressed to all the types of EU actors that can initiate a process leading to the adoption of those decisions (i.e. the various representatives of EU member states as well as of EU institutions).

**1. To increase the specificity of the policy**

To enhance the credibility of its conflict prevention policy, the EU should increase the specificity of the policy's institutionalisation. To this end, it would be suitable to adopt a new and comprehensive document on the policy. Whereas the existing EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts established conflict prevention as one of the main objectives of the EU's external relations and outlined the necessary reforms, the new document should raise, in the first place, the specificity of the policy.

Above all, the document should define what the place of conflict prevention in the hierarchy of the EU's external relations is, primarily in relation to crisis management as another basic type of security policy. Apparently, the increase of institutionalisation itself cannot guarantee greater efficiency of political action, as the latter is substantially determined by political will. Still, a more specific definition of the EU's conflict prevention policy would certainly increase its credibility.

**2. To elaborate the policy's strategy**

The suggested increase of the policy's specificity should not only address its position among other EU security instruments, but it should also specify the strategy on which the policy will primarily be based. In this way, the new document on the policy should declare whether the EU intends to develop structural and operational prevention to the same extents or prefers one of the approaches to the other. This would, again, enhance the overall credibility of the policy and, therefore, also its efficiency.

**3. To establish a central policy-making institution**

A clear division of power as well as of labour should be established between the Council and the Commission. In addition, one institutional body should be vested with a central policy-making role in the policy. The most suitable option appears to be the PSC as the appropriate Council body. This issue is, however, related to the solution of the institutional (in)coherence of the EU's external relations as such.

**4. To develop analysis and assessment capacities**

To employ in full the uniquely wide range of instruments available for the conflict prevention role of the EU, the EU should concentrate on the development of analysis and assessment capacities.